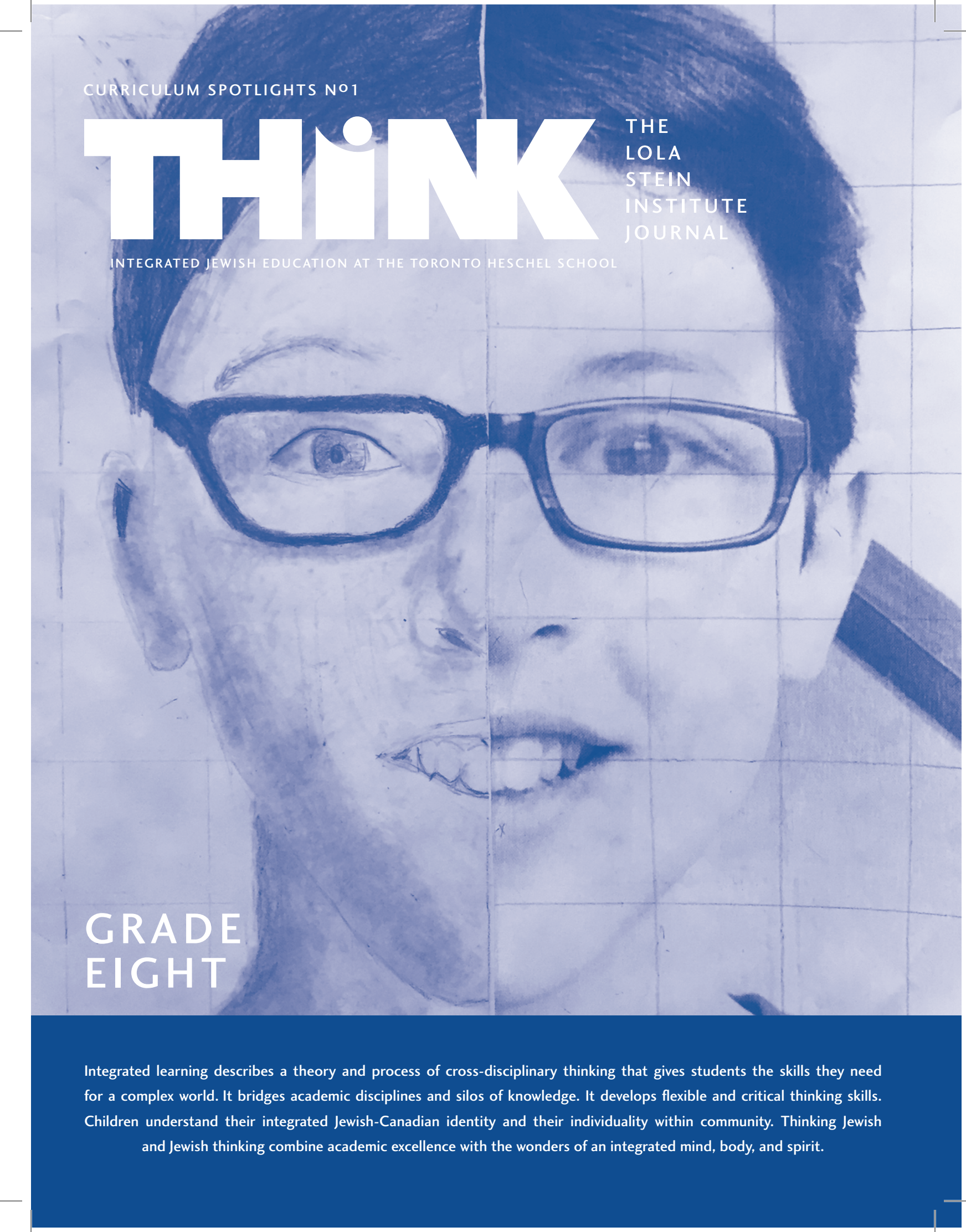




CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS Nº1

THiNK

THE
LOLA
STEIN
INSTITUTE
JOURNAL

INTEGRATED JEWISH EDUCATION AT THE TORONTO HESCHEL SCHOOL

GRADE
EIGHT

Integrated learning describes a theory and process of cross-disciplinary thinking that gives students the skills they need for a complex world. It bridges academic disciplines and silos of knowledge. It develops flexible and critical thinking skills. Children understand their integrated Jewish-Canadian identity and their individuality within community. Thinking Jewish and Jewish thinking combine academic excellence with the wonders of an integrated mind, body, and spirit.



Lunar Awe

THE CASE FOR NAKED-EYE ASTRONOMY
IN A GOOGLE EARTH WORLD

BY YARDEN BOURLAS

Every September, when the air outside becomes crisp and the days shorten, when darkness begins to reclaim its fair share of the diurnal cycle, the Grade 8 class at our school launches into Space and Time, our astronomy unit. I ask students to turn their attention towards that very moon that has been with them each night since the day they were born. They know that at the beginning of the Jewish month, Rosh Chodesh, the moon is obscured completely by shadow, and in the middle of the month, it is a bright glowing orb.

After collecting measurements and making sketches, or writing bits of poetry in their observation journals, students inevitably ask the astronomical question: Why does the moon wax and wane throughout the month? Here is where the difficulty begins because I don't tell them the answer. I encourage them to use the scientific method just as scientists have done since the Enlightenment. Students observe the phenomenon in the sky, quantify their observations in numbers, and create hypotheses and models in order to answer their own questions about what causes their experience of day and night, summer and winter, and the many changing phases of the moon.

In his book *Prelude to Mathematics*, mathematician and educator W.W. Sawyer writes, "To see the clear, logical ideas gradually being disentangled from vagueness and confusion is vastly more instructive than simply starting with the logical ideas."¹ Students sometimes become distressed that I don't simply tell them that the moon revolves around the earth approximately every 28 days which causes the various moon phases. Why don't I save them the confusion and frustration that accompanies solving such complex problems? I don't because I don't want to rob them of the growth that comes from collecting evidence, testing and falsifying hypotheses, and slowly but surely clarifying the understanding on their own. I want them to grapple with questions like: What causes day and night? Why does the sun seem to rise in the east and travel westward across the sky?

You might wonder how such apparently sophisticated answers can be reached by students who have neither been to outer space nor had access to satellite imagery that captures these magnificent spheres in action. In truth, the information is a mere Google search away, but our students know that by our school's standards looking something up does not constitute the practice of science. Instead, the grade

By our school's standards, looking up an answer does not constitute the practice of science.

ights participate in naked-eye astronomy. They follow in the tradition of ancient Greek astronomers like Eratosthenes who could confirm that the earth is round and even measure its circumference with remarkable accuracy using only sticks and shadows. My students design experiments and record their observations watching shadows move across their sundial, one they made simply with a pen cap that casts a shadow and a circle marked in 360 degrees and printed on cardstock. This basic tool lets them track the rate at which the shadows move throughout the day, which, in turn, illuminates that what causes the shadows to move is the earth's rotation on its axis and not the sun moving across the sky.

At our annual Grade 8 moon observation party on a clear night in October, we kick off an experiment that reveals the moon's apparent westward journey across the sky. After three nights of collecting observations and data, there is usually quite an uproar when, on examining their data, students discover that each evening the moon begins its journey 12 degrees further to the east. How had they never noticed this before? How can the moon be moving in two directions at once?

If your brow is currently furrowed in an attempt to picture this you might understand how the grade eights feel. Most students find the process more than a little unnerving. Broadly speaking, people don't enjoy the feeling of not understanding, and the Space and Time unit provokes that uneasiness in a powerful way. By doing so, it encourages students to discover and hone skills that they possess inherently for survival in the wilderness of the unknown: What does one do when answers are not immediately available? Again, we can learn from the ancients and look to Abraham who also puzzles over the movement of the heavenly spheres. There is a Midrash, an interpretative tale, that tells the story:

When Abraham was three years old he went out from the cave, and thought to himself: "Who created the heavens and the earth and me?" He prayed the whole day to the sun [because he thought it was the creator]. In the evening, the sun sank in the west and the moon shone in the east. When he saw the moon and the stars all around he said, "This is the creator of the heavens and the earth and me, and the stars are the creators' ministers and servants." In the morning, the moon sank in the west and the sun rose in the east. He said, "These have no

power of their own; there is some power over them. To this I will pray and show respect."

Abraham arrives, by trial and error, at his conviction that there is a power beyond the celestial bodies. Through inquiry and observation he realizes the sun and moon are transitory and he develops assurance in his own judgment, which serves him well later when he becomes the first exponent of monotheism in a pagan world.

Similarly, the Space and Time unit encourages students to develop confidence and to trust their own judgment. As they learn the nature of evidence and subject their ideas to scrutiny, they develop their capacity to reason. The practice of developing and revising their ideas and arguments gradually turns confusion into clarity as they muster the courage, discipline, and, yes, faith required to traverse the chasm between confusion and understanding. Like Abraham, they use their wits to reach for understanding rather than passively await divine revelation to unveil what has been obscure. Nor do they wait for a teacher to tell them the answer. The scientific method is the map that charts their path through the murky landscape of complex problems. The furrowed brows of my students—when I ask whether it's the sun or Earth that's moving—tells me that they have embarked on the uphill path towards figuring it out.

In her article "The Necessity of Awe," philosopher Helen De Cruz examines the previously underestimated role that feelings of awe have to play for scientists. She writes, "Awe increases our tolerance for uncertainty and opens our receptivity to new and unusual ideas."² In an age where information is abundant but attention is scarce, practising naked-eye astronomy encourages students to open up their senses, they find within themselves the patience, rigour, and grit required to develop and argue for their ideas. The temptation to give up is strong. But students don't tend to give up. Perhaps they realize that when we do science, it's not merely answers that we seek but rather, like Abraham, we are motivated by awe and wonder to continue contemplating that which is just beyond what we understand.

1 W.W. Sawyer, *Prelude to Mathematics*, rev. ed. (New York: Dover Publications, 2011), p. 145.

2 Helen De Cruz, "The Necessity of Awe," Aeon, July 10, 2020, para. 22, <https://aeon.co/essays/how-awe-drives-scientists-to-make-a-leap-into-the-unknown>

When we notice and accept differences on the outside, we can then see common worth on the inside.

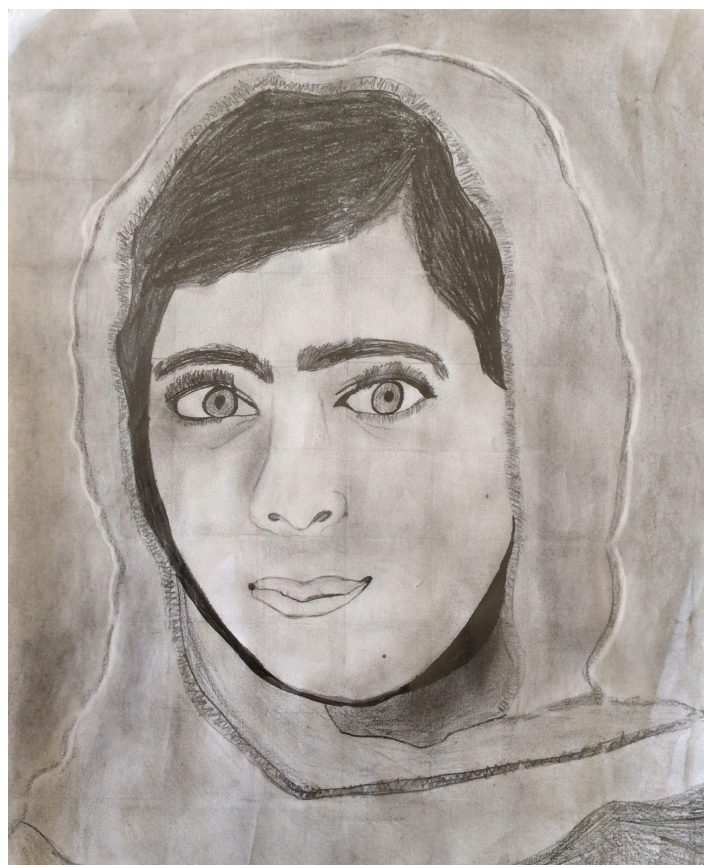
Life Lessons and the Art of Portraiture

BY DANIEL ABRAMSON

Like many people, I have always been fascinated by old family photographs. I love looking at familiar faces in those black-and-white photos, trying to see myself. These images of mostly small moments, frozen in time, repeat their stories each time I look at them. Sometimes they joyfully reveal something new that I missed the last time I looked, and sometimes they quietly bring forward an ache of memory, with its persistent insistence of absence. The images are always meaningful, but each time I look, the meanings aren't always the same.

On one hand, to anyone who has ever looked nostalgically at an old photo, it seems obvious to say that the way we find meaning in these images depends on the narratives and perspectives that we, the viewers, bring to an image at any given time. Consider though, the broader implications of that statement. If the meaning of an image is created inside the viewer, as something dynamic and transient and not inherent or fixed in the image itself, then how is it possible for an artist to create anything meaningful at all? After all, isn't it the artist who is making a statement through the use of chosen artistic forms and materials?

Such complex questions about the "location" of meaning in art are among the most challenging and interesting questions that have been asked ever since drawings first appeared on cave walls 60,000 years ago. These questions are the driving force behind the discourse of the postmodern era. At Toronto Heschel, we pose essential questions like these to our students and to ourselves as teachers. We ask students to consider these dilemmas as their understanding of a particular idea evolves.



Is artistic practice essentially an inward-looking reflective process or do artists look to create meaning through mimicry of outward forms? Reframed pedagogically, should we ask students to paint what they feel or what they see? As is often the case in matters of the post-modern, the answer is...it depends.

In Senior Kindergarten, there is significant value in teaching students to start their lives as artists by painting what they see. The young students learn to draw their own faces as they look carefully at their reflections in small mirrors. Examining their faces closely, they learn formal design elements such as line, colour, texture, shape, symmetry, and scale. They also learn about expression and meaning, as they observe how subtle changes in outward facial expressions speak about their inner feelings.

Even at a young age, drawing the face raises telling questions about difference. What makes us look different from one another? Do these differences matter? What is common in every face? How are we all like one another?

We approach these early questions with artistic practices that are "outward looking"; the artist looks out into the world and observes, records, and communicates what he/she sees. These foundational explorations give the children important tools for decoding complex non-verbal cues as they take their first steps to become empathetic, understanding observers of the world.

Much as our own thoughts and feelings about old photographs change as time passes, our pedagogical approaches to portraiture evolve as our students progress through their years at Heschel. In

Grade 8, students study the “rise of the individual” and wonder about the motives and meaning behind great works of art, such as Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, a painting famously obtuse in its subject’s outward expression. Students also study important human rights activists and create portraits of them, which gives them a chance to wonder what is going on behind their eyes, too.

The students also draw self-portraits and compare their images to those of the human rights activists they have painted. The focus of this exercise is on the elements of artistic practice that are inward looking and reflective. The juxtaposition of the students’ own faces and the faces of the well-known changemakers invites questions to go deeper than the external observation and mimicry of outward appearances. When we ask students to wonder about the similarities and differences between themselves and the activists, we are not asking about physical traits. Rather, we are nudging our students to look beyond the image and see the human attributes that may have compelled these activists to act with such conviction and passion.

The amazing thing about portraiture as an art form is that, at its best, it is simultaneously a celebration of the uniqueness of its subject and an obliteration of the notion of individuality. Portraits are thought-provoking. They open up interesting areas of ambiguity, and they pose tough questions about difference and sameness.

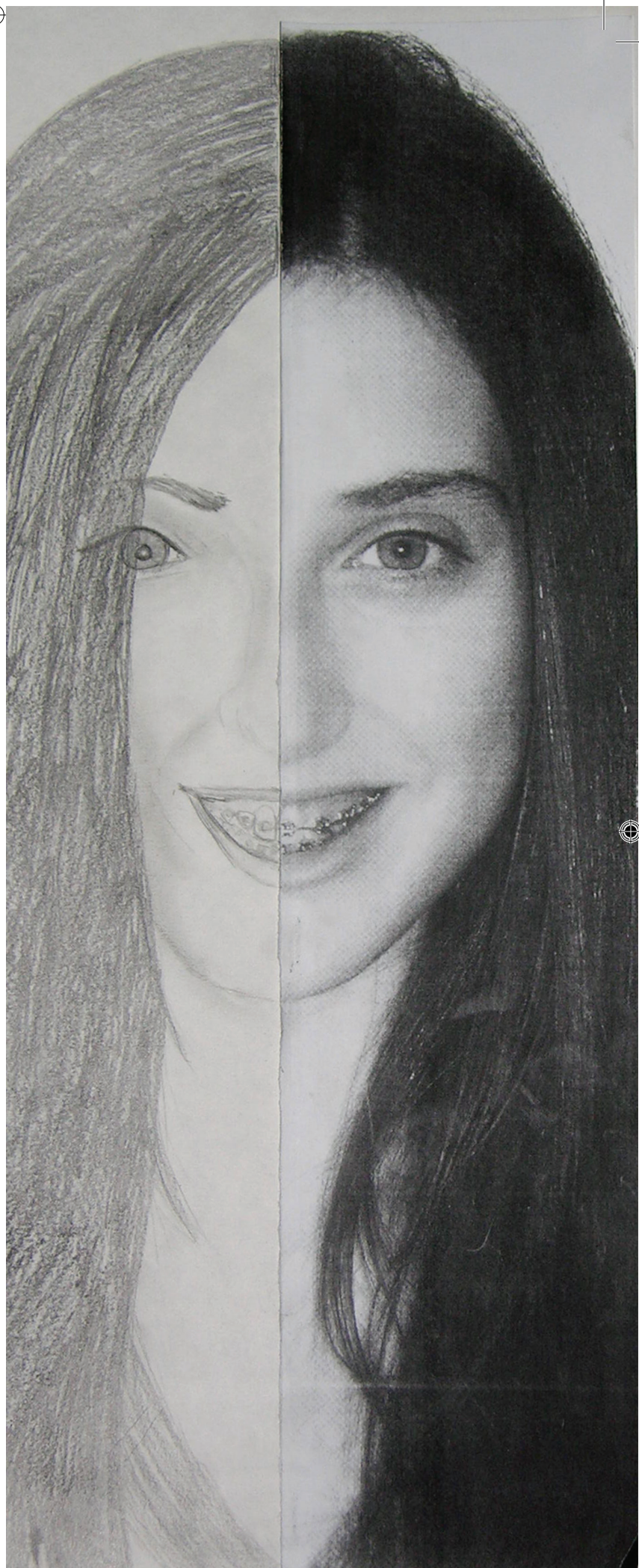
These very questions are so important for students in early adolescence. As they come of age in our tradition, they are already working through the subtle process of figuring out who they want to be. At Toronto Heschel, we integrate this kind of important generative expansive theme across the curriculum. In language arts class, students address the theme of individuality through literary character studies; in science, they study the reason and timelines for the emergence of human diversity; and, in art class, they use portraits.

At the end of it all, we wonder...does the art of the portrait help us to see the uniqueness of each person, or does it allow us to recognize what is common to us all? As with other challenging questions, we find compelling answers in Jewish texts. In this passage from Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Sanhedrin* 38a, students are taught to consider the wonder of diversity:

When a coin maker mints many coins from one mould, they are all alike. Their identical appearance makes their value equal. In comparison, when God fashioned all people from the one mould of the first person, not one resembles the other, yet all have the same value.

When we look carefully at each other, when we notice and accept each other’s differences on the outside, then we can strive to see the common worth on the inside. This is what we encourage from Senior Kindergarten through Grade 8.

Daniel Abramson is an artist, photographer and teacher. At the Toronto Heschel School his classes include Junior High science and art.



The Jewish Foundations of a Junior High Human Rights Curriculum

AN INTERVIEW WITH DANA EZER

BY PAM MEDJUCK STEIN

Dana Ezer finds junior high students to be particularly egocentric and ripe for a “me versus you” conversation; they are preoccupied with thinking about how they fit into the social scene, and who they are in the universe. Dana has been teaching junior high for twelve years; she tells her students to keep it up but also to compare their circumstances to those of others. She asks them not just to look at the “other,” but to consider all human relationships. Juxtaposing “us and them” exposes truths that bring students to reflect on humanity and on human rights.

The junior high human rights program at The Toronto Heschel School was developed by a team of educators committed to revealing the Jewish foundations of what is now known as the study of human rights. This senior Jewish day school program uncovers new learning beneath old themes, as students reconsider what perhaps they took for granted in earlier grades. Using traditional modalities of Jewish study, which by now are very familiar to them, the human rights curriculum links social justice learning to the students’ Jewish identity. Dana begins her explanations citing the Jewish proverb, “Know from where you came and to where you are going” (*Pirkei Avot* 3:1).

Jewish pedagogy #1: By Grade 6, the students are comfortable with multi-layered meaning. They have learned Rashi, the medieval French commentator, who interpreted ancient Jewish text. Rashi questions what he finds and generates his answers by looking back into the text and referencing *midrashim*, the rabbinic commentaries. With Rashi as their model, the students learn that asking questions, and being unsettled with what they are reading, is a Jewish tradition. Early Rashi training has taught them to investigate text for meaning and to begin unravelling disparate relationships and references.

Jewish pedagogy #2: Also by Grade 6, the students’ learning process has become their identity; they are people who listen, converse, question. Their formula is to sit and study with a peer in the time-tested tradition of *chevruta*, understanding that a second perspective brings deeper learning.

Dana emphasizes how this bit of Torah or Talmud, “this artifact,” has served hundreds of generations, and how a single unifying language, spoken through thousands of years, still speaks for and to all Jews everywhere. Saying “every Jew can do this,” she invites her students to ask, “What can I find for myself, right here, in these words, as opposed to other places?” The wisdom is there and is theirs.

Dana teaches that “Judaism is a religion that asks you to be an active participant... We don’t take things in passively, we are active.” In Jewish text, her students find themes that relate to their own life experiences and they apply the layered meanings to the plight and power of humanity; the process renders them active participants in their tradition.

Two Projects

The following two examples were posted as models for the Prize for Teaching Excellence 2016 and are described more fully online.

www.lolastein.ca/teaching-excellence-contest.html

Pay It Forward Purim

Dana tells me, “Our project is on the highest level. We want to foster their love for *tzedakah*. The students love it. We set them up to understand that doing *tzedakah* is not easy, but also, being Jewish is not easy. It is a huge responsibility, but it is also the best gift.” *Tzedakah* is Hebrew for righteousness and charity. On the holiday of Purim, the *mitzvah* (commandment) is *Matanot L'Evyonim* (to give gifts to the poor).

Dana explains that Purim asks us to look inwards and give something to others that we know will have value to them because we have seen it has value to us. The holiday celebrates a Jewish woman in Diaspora who is pressured into action by a cousin, yet makes her own choices. Although assimilated, Esther first fasts, a Jewish modality, to help her focus inwards and strategize a brilliant plan. She uses the gift she has, her sexuality and beauty, and saves the Jewish people.

The story is one of chaos and chance. The Persian King draws lots; fate falls against the Jews and he agrees to annihilate them. Dana’s students go to an unsettling place, into the winter night to meet the homeless, who live and

die by chance. They deliver something of value to the men and women they come upon and also offer dignity; first, a food package and clothes, then a second package for each recipient to give to someone else. Each recipient becomes a benefactor.

Mordechai had warned Esther, that, queen or not, she would fall too: Don't think you will be excluded. You are a Jew because it's in your blood. Esther wrought an edict from the King giving Jews the right to protect themselves; salvation through self-defence. The message is: You can fight for your lives. The students share what they have and rekindle dignity in the Toronto cold.

Human Rights Speeches

Being the voice is difficult—it is easier to stay quiet. Dana says that “especially junior high girls like to be invisible at this age; it is easier not to put yourself out there. But that is anti-Jewish.”

To embrace the personal challenge is a lesson itself. There are always choices; students can sit back and let someone be bullied, or not. “Challenge is to know who you are and to follow that; to trust your instincts because you are educated.”

The students again use a familiar Jewish study process. The rabbinic method is to look at text, ask questions, read commentators, go back to text, and understand it differently. Students bring rabbinic analysis into daily life. In Judaic studies class, they collect articles about current events, reviewing a wide variety of sources. They pick a topic that they connect to personally; perhaps it is education, which they might narrow down to focus on education in Afghanistan and the activism of Malala Yousafzai.

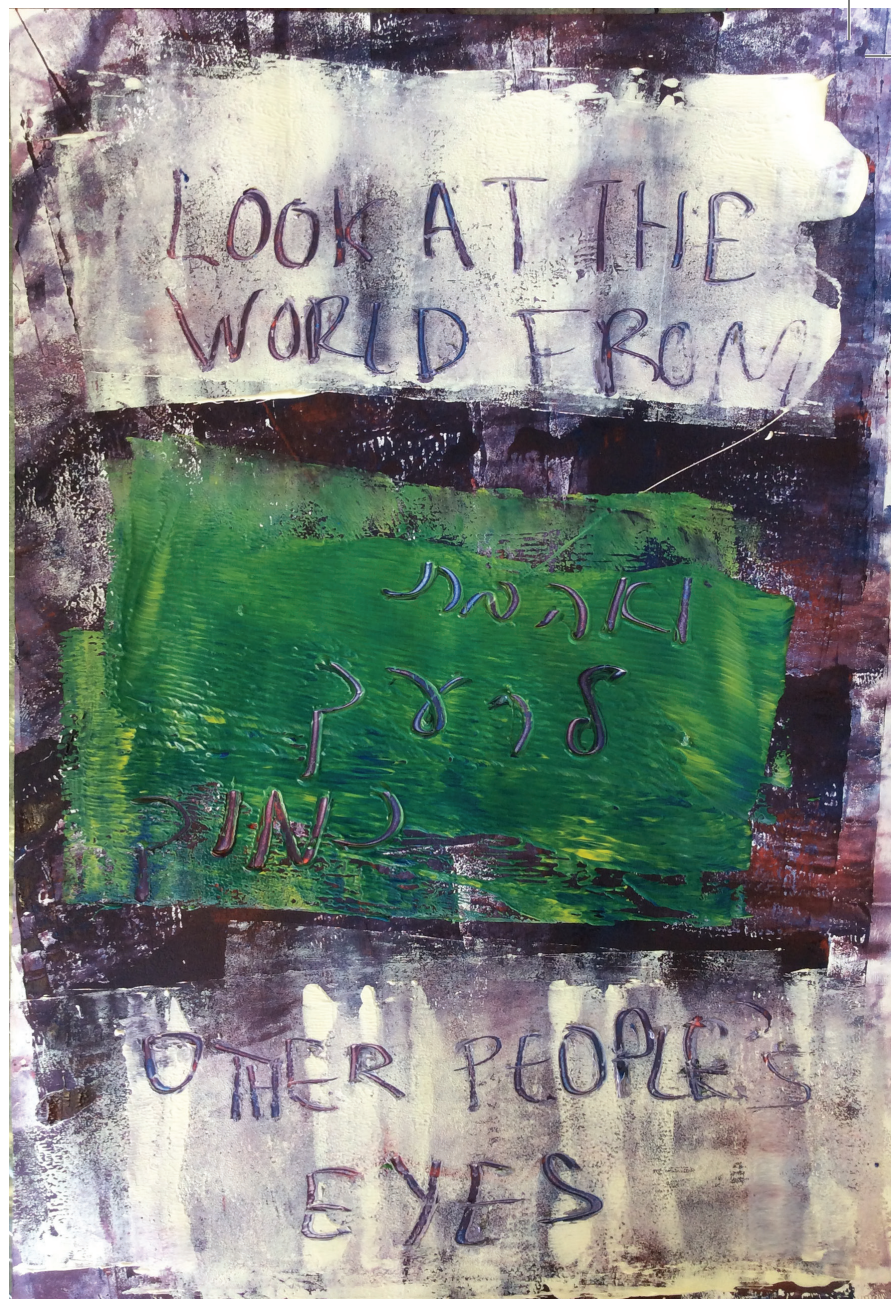
Reviewing their collected articles critically in the rabbinic tradition, students ask who is the author, what is the story about, who else has written, how does it connect to other topics? They learn not to get caught up with taglines, but to read media carefully, and work to understand the subject thoroughly.

Lifting out pieces of text and applying their meaning to real life experiences is also rabbinic process. Students ask what Judaism says about their topic and look to ancient text. For example, in the Talmud, causing embarrassment is described as akin to murder; the redness on a person's face is red like blood.

In the *Book of Isaiah* (c.58), the people are fasting while their workers work and all proceeds as usual. On God's behalf, the prophet cries out,

Is such the fast I desire, a day for men to starve their bodies?... No, this is the fast I desire: Unlock the fetters of wickedness... Share your bread with the hungry and take the wretched poor into your home...do not ignore your own kin.

In “The Reasons for My Involvement in the Peace Movement,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes,



For many years I lived by the conviction that my destiny is to serve in the realm of privacy... Three events changed my attitude. One was the countless onslaughts upon my inner life, depriving me of the ability to sustain inner stillness. The second event was the discovery that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself... The third...was my study of the prophets of ancient Israel... There is immense silent agony in the world, and the task of man is to be a voice for the plundered poor, to prevent the desecration of the soul and the violation of our dream of honesty.¹

Dana Ezer says, “Getting up and speaking is Jewish. Using their voice for good is Jewish.”

¹ From *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997), p. 225.

Pam Medjuck Stein is the Editor of *THINK: The Lola Stein Institute Journal*.



CURRICULUM SPOTLIGHTS shine on our classrooms, school-wide programs and educational approach. They come from THINK, a semi-annual journal produced by The Lola Stein Institute (LSI), the research and publication arm of The Toronto Heschel School. THINK presents contributions from educators, parents, and community members on integrated Jewish education, critical themes on raising children today, and the interactivity of school and community.

There are many activities described in the Curriculum Spotlights, some of which may not be in current practice. The Toronto Heschel School's activities and curriculum evolve constantly as its educators continue to add wisdom and inspiration, but the ideas and philosophy remain constant.



The Toronto Heschel School
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